

THE GOLDEN ROAD TO NOWHERE: FLECKER'S *HASSAN* AND THE ROMANTIC SUBLIME

BARNABY RALPH

INTRODUCTION

The English poet and playwright James Elroy Flecker (1884–1915) might be positioned chronologically as a Modernist, but, in terms of his output, was much more of a Romantic. His play *Hassan* is his most significant contribution to the body of 'orientalist' literature, but has received scant critical attention. This is possibly due to it being a work out of its time. Flecker himself was famously influenced by the Parnassians, but one can argue that the roots of his literary style can be traced further back. Critics have tended to focus on Flecker as something of an oddity for his time, but the true extent of this is greater than one might suspect: it is possible to argue that, in a literary sense, he was substantially living at least one hundred years in the past.

This discussion considers Flecker's orientalist construction in *Hassan*, arguing that it relies upon a post-Burkean, post-Kantian model of the sublime. His gloriously inaccurate version of Baghdad was designed to evoke awe with both its beauty and its terror, complete with grotesqueries. The emotive effect thereby achieved is late 18th- or even early 19th-century in its conception. His play is thus not a construction that is hostile towards Islam, as Aiman S. Al-Garrallah and Ibrahim A. Na'ana'h have suggested recently, but, rather, evokes the duality (and, thus, Romantic breadth of experience and imagination) of an imagined world. That it takes place in an Eastern setting owes more, perhaps, to the fantasies of the armchair readers of Burton and other interpreters of the Orient in the latter part of the 19th century than it does to any attempt at cultural or historical recreation.

PERCEPTIONS OF FLECKER

Flecker is not such a well-known figure amongst scholars today. There is only a small amount written on his life and works, and much of it is less than complimentary. It seems almost fashionable to make sport of him. A 1976 biography by John M. Munro, arguably the most widely available sketch of his life, spends much of its time pointing out his precociousness as a child, his pretentiousness as a young man and the disdain in which others apparently held him. The last paragraph of the book sums up Flecker's life and work thus:

Just as his vanity, complacency, and insensitivity to the feelings of others rendered him incapable of being either a sympathetic husband or an effective member of the foreign service, so these defects of character seem to have inhibited his development as a writer. (Munro 116)

Douglas Goldring, in a 1922 discussion of Flecker's life and works had the following to say about one of his earlier poems:

Before composing this work he had, I believe, lunched unwisely. After luncheon, in a mauve silk shirt, he had punted on the Cherwell and sadly and regretfully he had been seasick into it. The tragedies of youth! (Goldring 15)

More unkindly, perhaps, and certainly more directly, he offered the following opinion of Flecker in the *Academy* very soon after his death:

He was not remarkable for originality or depth of feeling, and had no flashes of the blinding inspiration of genius. (qtd. in Sherwood 222)

John Heath-Stubbs mentions the poet in a satirical verse published in 1971 and titled "To a Poet a Thousand Years Hence" (itself a satire of Flecker's most famous poem), which has the stanza:

How shall we conquer—all our pride
Fades like a summer sunset's glow:
Who will read me when I am gone—
For who reads Elroy Flecker now? (qtd. in Munro 10)

In order, therefore, to discuss the work of an author either under attack from his biographers or in some danger of slipping into obscurity, a brief biographical sketch is necessary. This discussion draws on Munro and Goldring, of course (both of whom very likely had their own reasons for their dislike of the poet), but also on a number of other sources, including a *Life* by Geraldine Hodgson, a biography by Flecker's nephew, John Sherwood, a critical study by Ronald Gillanders and, finally, a short, unfinished prose sketch by no less an orientalist than T.E. Lawrence.

BIOGRAPHICAL OVERVIEW

The son of a Cheltenham schoolmaster, Flecker was born in 1884. His youth was spent in literary discussion and music and, at thirteen, he started writing poetry. He was apparently unhappy at school, finding it unable to provide suitable intellectual challenges and being largely uninterested in what Sherwood calls the atmosphere of “games-worship” that pervaded the late Victorian educational system. Subsequently, he studied Classics at Oxford, where he affected, according to several accounts, the mannerisms of a ‘decadent’, in the bohemian, post-Wildean style that had been so popular in the closing decade of the nineteenth century (Munro 24; Goldring 13). More significantly for his later work, perhaps, his letters at the time suggested a growing disillusionment with Christianity.

After a brief period as a schoolmaster, he went on to study Oriental languages at Cambridge. He was apparently known there for, amongst other accomplishments, his free, lively translations of Arabic stories (Goldring 38). He was also an avid reader of Burton's translations of the *Arabian Nights* and had been since at least his time at Oxford (Sherwood 34). Following Cambridge, he entered the foreign service, travelling to Constantinople. It was here that he first suffered from consumption. His sickness saw

him take leave in England and on the Continent, but he returned to active duty in Beirut for a time, where he became close to T.E. Lawrence, whom he had met first in 1911 (Sherwood 146) and gotten to know well thereafter. The consumption remained, however, and Flecker suffered a relapse and entered a sanitarium in Switzerland. He died in that country less than two years later in January of 1915. Lawrence—who Munro tells (41) us regarded Flecker with contempt—wrote:

There, these are such poor fragments of delight. Flecker is dead. ‘Do write me a word. I’m sick, and very miserable’ was the last post-card, from his cruel mountain-side in Switzerland. With him there went out the sweetest singer of the war generation.

This hardly seems like the eulogy of a man who regarded Flecker poorly. The two were friends in many ways and found much to admire in each other.

CATEGORIZING FLECKER

Flecker can be positioned chronologically as either a Modernist or a Georgian, but neither really seems to match his inclinations. Munro paints him firmly as a Parnassian (53) but, temperamentally, perhaps, he is better considered an Aestheticist—or even a late Romantic. He was certainly known to a number of leading figures in the Modernist movement, initially through, as Simon has noted, his connection with Cambridge (126). Indeed, there was early enthusiasm for his works as heralding a new artistic direction (Aldington, Steele and Chang 48), but this might have been comfortable, post-Byronic nostalgia in action, rather than a genuine belief that he was creating something that had not previously been seen. Evelyn Howell, for example, views Flecker in the context of an utterly Romantic tradition, through his enduring association with the British poetic Orientalist movement, noting that even the mention of his name inspired exotic visions of “Samarkand” (44). A reading of his verse suggests more sympathy with the ideals of the Orientalist Romantics (Byron comes to mind here most forcefully) than with other schools.

Following a common view, Munro considers Flecker as Parnassian and Georgian, ultimately rejecting the former and settling on the latter due to the poet's use of almost clinical detail, "metallic" imagery, a lack of poetic movement in the scenery and rigid, formal structure (65), as well as Flecker's own identification with the term in his volume of poetry *The Golden Journey to Samarkand* (62). The Literary Supplement of *The Times* (August 28, 1913) described the volume as expounding "the theory of the Parnassian School of Poetry" (qtd. in Hodgson 199).

One might suggest, however, that Munro's own inherent dislike of his subject has coloured his perception and caused a narrowing of perspective. Whilst Flecker employed some Parnassian devices, he used Romantic notions in his construction, although he is rarely—if at all—described as such. A possible key to this mystery, or so it might be argued, is Flecker's inherent interest in political activism (Goldring 41). He was not a Romantic in the terms of a poet like Wordsworth, who he saw as "didactic" (qtd. in Munro 62), but more in accord with Shelley and Keats. Flecker was an admirer of both and offered the opinion, in a letter to Geraldine Hodgson, that; "Shelley's enthusiasms made a flame of his poetry" (Hodgson 201). In his lifetime and immediately following his death, as it happens, instinctive comparisons were drawn between the two, however spurious they may have been (Hodgson 231).

Flecker's poetry contains many of the hallmarks of Romanticism. The creation of a symbolist mythic structure, the elevation of the self as hero, the contrast of the mundane and the extraordinary and the reliance on imagination as the source of authority—these are Romantic characteristics. Consider, for example, these lines from 'Stillness':

Then twittering out in the night my thought-birds flee.
I am emptied of all my dreams:
I only bear Earth turning, only see
Ether's long bankless streams,
And only know I should drown if you laid not your hand on me.

As for the use of classical allusion and any charge of sympathy with the

Neoclassicists, one can find in Flecker the same internalizing of allegorical elements to suit the Romantic self that is apparent in both Keats and Shelley—an appropriation of the classical in order to clarify inwardly directed narrative rather than a formulaic explication.

The use of myth in this sense, both classical and oriental, offers an insight into Flecker's sense of what can be described as a poetic sublime. It is to this idea—and to the work which affords the clearest example of its exposition—that this discussion shall now turn.

FLECKER'S ORIENTAL SUBLIME AND HASSAN

For the purposes of this paper, the idea of the sublime examined is based on that popularized by both Kant and Burke. Essentially, before Burke, the sublime was associated with beauty and greatness. Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry* of 1756 argued that the sublime was something aside from beauty. It generated both terror and attraction. Kant, too, distinguished between the sublime and the beautiful in discussions from 1764 and 1790.

Hegel's conception of the sublime moved on a step from these and is possibly the most relevant to this play. He considered the role of orientalism with regard to the sublime, creating a negative and over-simplified idea of the East (Hung 262; Al-Da'mi 2). "We thus find only dry understanding amongst the Easterns, a mere enumeration of determinations, a logic like the Wolffian of old" (*from*: Hegel's Lectures on the History of Philosophy). One can argue that, in many ways, *Hassan* is, essentially, an Hegelian construction. Flecker was certainly aware of Hegel's work on the Orient and mentions him in the prose 'visionary fantasy' *N'Jawk*, written in the style of Samuel Butler. The oriental world is deeply autocratic and that the complexity of the art and culture are evidence of an underlying Hegelian sublime. One can see this in the fact, for example, that Hassan, a poor man, nevertheless as an exceptionally fine, although threadbare, carpet in his shop.

In terms of Flecker's work, the sublime is the largeness of conception—the breadth of poetic vision—that lies behind the overlaid narrative

structure in his oriental poems and plays, as well as the detail of art. The complexity, in a Hegelian construction, of oriental patterns and language provides sublimity but not depth—a large canvas with no true profundity behind its decoration. The sublime elements exist in both the language and in the setting of the work. The play also contains the elements of terror and attraction that are consistent with post-Burkean precepts. Beauty, when it appears, is clearly distinct from the sublime apparent in the narrative and *mise-en-scène*.

The grandeur of spectacle needed to advance an ‘oriental’ sublimity was apparent in the production of the play itself, delayed until 1923 due to the First World War. The first version of the work was based on a Turkish farce that Flecker read during his language studies while employed by the foreign office (Sherwood 139). He changed the setting to Bagdad rather than Turkey, however, due to being impressed by a French translation by Jean-Charles Madrus. Over subsequent revisions, the play became gradually more tragic and socially aware. As his wife was to explain, he “became more impressed by the vicissitudes of the poor in the East” (Sherwood 140). This was an expression of one might consider Romantic socialism, perhaps—a Shelleyesque conceit, as Edward Aveling and Eleanor Marx were to claim in 1888 (Natarajan 243).

The play itself concerns Hassan, a poor confectioner who is drawn into court life by saving the life of the Caliph Haroun al Rashid. He finds himself both attracted and repulsed by the decadent new world of which he is now a part. He sees the cruel treatment of a rebel leader and his lover, and, ultimately sickened, flees the city in company with Ishak, the Caliph’s poet, taking “the golden road to Sammarkand”, itself a metaphor for the following of poetic dreams.

Although he does engage, Hassan himself is more of a character that things happen to than an instigator of events. Hapless and largely impotent, he is not a hero in any sense and neither can be said to be a true protagonist, for all that the plot revolves around the situations in which he finds himself. In a way, perhaps, he could be considered a member of the audience who stands amazed at the spectacle which unfolds before him. If there is a hero in the Romantic sense in this play, however, it is in the person of

the poet Ishak. He, unlike Hassan, understands his inner world and follows intuition, turning away from riches and security to possible poverty, uncertainty and, ultimately, self-validation. The audience laughs at Hassan but connects with Ishak.

CONCLUSION

Hassan never graced the stage in Flecker's lifetime. Instead, it appeared first in 1923 with music by Delius. It caught the fancy of the English audience at the time, due in large part to a post-war vogue for oriental imagery.(Redwood 71). It did not fare so well in America, however, as tastes there inclined towards the modern, and this play was seen as "an old-style production" at least ten years out of date (Redwood 72).

The music, for what it is worth, is mostly Delius at his most pastoral. It is evocative, certainly, but more of a morning in the Cotswolds than a dusty afternoon in Bagdad.

Aiman S. Al-Garrallah and Ibrahim A. Na'ana'h have suggested recently that Flecker's work is antagonistic towards Islam, going so far as to state directly that he "hates Islam because he is a Christian" (10). Their deconstruction of the representation of the Muslim faith in the play is convincing, stemming as it does from genuine knowledge about both history and doctrine, but their contention that Flecker was Christian is unsupported. In fact, he was largely antagonistic towards all religions, which is related to his struggling against a strict upbringing by a deeply Christian family. Flecker was openly agnostic. He wrote "I love this world passionately and can get up neither enthusiasm for nor belief in another" in a letter to Hellé, his wife, dictated towards the end of his life (qtd. in Redwood 37). The charge of hatred of Islam might be justly levelled at Hegel, but hardly at Flecker.

Hassan is as orientalist a piece as, in many ways, Shelley's 1818 *Revolt of Islam*. Both are critiques of a society—represented in the person of a tyrant—which imposes itself on the individual and neither work is particularly 'oriental' beyond their setting. *Hassan* can also be considered a self-referential work to some extent, if one considers the cruel Caliph as a

malign composite of the forces that oppressed Flecker himself, whether his parents, his superiors in the Foreign Service or the disease that was to end his life so early. It is more an attack on circumstance than on any group or place. The oriental trappings are just that—simply decorations for a cry against perceived injustice.

WORKS CONSULTED

- Al-Da'mi, Muhammed A. "Orientalism and Arab-Islamic History: An Inquiry into the Orientalists' Motives and Compulsions." *Arab Studies Quarterly* 20.4 (1998): 1–11. *JSTOR*. Web. 20 Apr. 2011.
- Al-Garrallah, Aiman S., and Ibrahim A. Na'ana'h. "Georgian Terrains: The Islamic Orient in James Elroy Flecker's *Hassan*." *Studies in Literature and Language* 1.4 (2010): 1–11. *Canadian Academy of Oriental and Occidental Culture*. Web. 17 Dec. 2010.
- Aldington, Richard, Stephen Steele and Heesok Chang. "Modernism at the Margins: Richard Aldington's Letters to Douglas Goldring (1932–1946)." *Modern Language Studies* 35.2 (2005): 22–55. *JSTOR*. Web. 11 Oct. 2010.
- Flecker, James Elroy. *Hassan: The Story of Hassan of Baghdad and How he Came to Make the Golden Journey to Samarkand*. London: 1922. Print.
- . *The Golden Journey to Samarkand*. London: M. Goschen, 1913. Print.
- . *Collected Poems*. 1916. Ed. John Squire. London: Secker and Warburg, 1947. Print.
- . *Collected Prose*. ebook.
- Gillanders, Ronald A. *James Elroy Flecker*. 2 Vols. Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1983. Print.
- Goldring, Douglas. *James Elroy Flecker: An Appreciation With Some Biographical Notes*. London: Chapman and Hall, 1922. Print.
- Hodgson, Geraldine. *The Life of James Elroy Flecker*. Boston: Houghton, 1925. Print.
- Howell, Evelyn. "A Layman's Delight in the 'Odyssey'." *Greece & Rome* 5.1 (1958): 34–44. *JSTOR*. Web. 11 Oct. 2010.
- Hung, Ho-Fung. "Orientalist Knowledge and Social Theories: China and the European Conceptions of East-West Differences from 1600 to 1900." *Sociological Theory* 21.3 (2003): 254–280. *JSTOR*. Web. 14 Jul. 2011.
- Ingham, Bruce. "Review: [untitled]." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 62.2 (1999): 349–350. *JSTOR*. Web. 11 Oct. 2010.
- Lawrence, T. E. "An Essay on Flecker." *T. E. Lawrence Studies* telawrence.net. 6 Jan. 2006. Web. 6 Jul. 2011.
- Morley, S. Griswold. "The Dignity of Facts." *PMLA* 66.1 (1951): 3–10. *JSTOR*. Web. 11 Oct. 2010.
- Munro, John M. *James Elroy Flecker*. Boston: Twayne, 1976. Print.
- Nattarajan, Uttara. Ed. *The Romantic Poets: A Guide to Criticism*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2007. Print.
- Redwood, Dawn. *Flecker and Delius—The Making of 'Hassan'*. London: Thames, 1978. Print.

Sherwood, John. *No Golden Journey*. London: Heinemann, 1973. Print.

Simon, Myron. "The Georgian Poetic." *The Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 2.1 (1969): 121–135. *JSTOR*. Web. 11 Oct. 2010.